

Creating an Inclusive Narrative



AUSTRALIAN BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY



“JUST AS THE RICHEST ECOSYSTEMS ARE
THOSE MARKED BY THEIR BIODIVERSITY,
SO TOO SOCIETIES HAVE THE POTENTIAL
TO BE MADE STRONGER BY THEIR
CULTURAL DIVERSITY.”

*Photograph of Native fig tree in Freshwater Creek
in Goomboora Park, Cairns.*

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Creating an Inclusive Narrative

PROLOGUE

From July 2019 to September 2020, the Australian Baha'i Community sought to identify what Australians understand about who we are as a people, the values that unite us, and how we can work towards a more socially cohesive society. Fifty roundtable discussions in all states and territories brought together Australians from a wide array of backgrounds in a shared conversation. This *Inclusive Narrative* captures how participants in the roundtables described Australia's journey with social cohesion through different stages of our history – where we have come from, and how we have grown to be who we are today. As Australian society has evolved, it has been the courage of countless individuals that has allowed us to take steps forward and to learn from both our mistakes and achievements.

As participation extended across the country, it became evident that two major aspirations were unfolding in the consultations: a strong desire to strengthen social cohesion and a deep-seated yearning for a profound shift in the functioning of Australian society.

Strengthening social cohesion was viewed as a goal in and of itself, but also as a means for creating a better future for all people. Participants observed that becoming a more cohesive country is intimately linked to our capacity to respond positively and constructively to social, environmental and structural challenges. Voiced on numerous occasions were feelings of concern, frustration, disappointment and dissatisfaction at the way individuals, groups and institutional structures and systems are geared towards a culture of self-preservation, competition and conflict. To this extent, it was felt we fell short of our purpose to serve the spiritual, social and material progress of society to create equity, balance, true justice and positive peace. It was also acknowledged that the contemporary discourse on social cohesion is centred around cultural, ethnic and religious diversity; whereas it is time to broaden our perspective to include disability, age and gender. Of particular concern was the inclusion of Indigenous peoples in this discourse. These passions and interests driving

participants meant conversations went beyond the idea of a socially cohesive society to something more satisfying and enriching. Participants spoke of the values, qualities and characteristics around which they long to see contemporary society coalesce. They mentioned qualities such as reciprocity, generosity, compassion and love, and valuing the nobility and dignity of all people so they can flourish and thrive. They wished to see the emergence of a country characterised by collaboration, a posture of learning in all matters, and an openness to new ways of living. A profound reorientation would allow social structures and systems - such as civil society organisations, community, government, commerce, economy, education and industry - to work more intentionally for the common good. This would necessarily ensure the health and well-being of everyone; empower people of every background to find solutions to the complex problems and the uncertainties of our time; and bring about a society free from oppression, prejudice, fear of scarcity and inequalities.

Recent crises have disrupted our way of life. This has revealed our weaknesses and vulnerabilities and has highlighted how deep the fractures in our society run. However, it has also raised consciousness of our common humanity and made apparent how interconnected we are. More than ever we can see we are in a time of change, transition and instability, uncertain of what the future holds. This is a time, once again, for courage, noble aims and high resolve, and for leaders whose character and integrity are congruent with such aspirations. The coming months and years present us with an opportunity to learn to build firmer foundations to withstand challenges looming on the horizon and those which will unexpectedly thrust themselves upon us. This urgent call to action – to concurrently strengthen social cohesion and address present-day and future challenges – is not just for leaders in government, institutions, civil society and faith communities, but for every individual who yearns for a life worth living.



Where have we been?

DIVERSITY IS IN OUR DNA

Ours is not a young country. It is a nation of nations that has been shaped by knowledge, culture and spiritual teachings spanning tens of thousands of years. Over millennia, Indigenous peoples lived with a deep regard for the natural world, practising sophisticated cultures with systems of governance, extensive trade relationships and sustainable land management. We belong to a land that has benefitted from the wise stewardship of the many nations of the Indigenous peoples of this country to whom we owe much gratitude.

Over the past two centuries, the national narrative has been further influenced by generations who have migrated and settled here — from convicts on the First Fleet to those who escaped hardship and tragedy in their countries of origin in search of safety, security, acceptance and the hope of a better future. Despite barriers on the basis of race, more recent waves of migrants from all ethnic backgrounds have woven themselves into the national fabric to share and shape our future. One-quarter of the population are born overseas and others have forebears

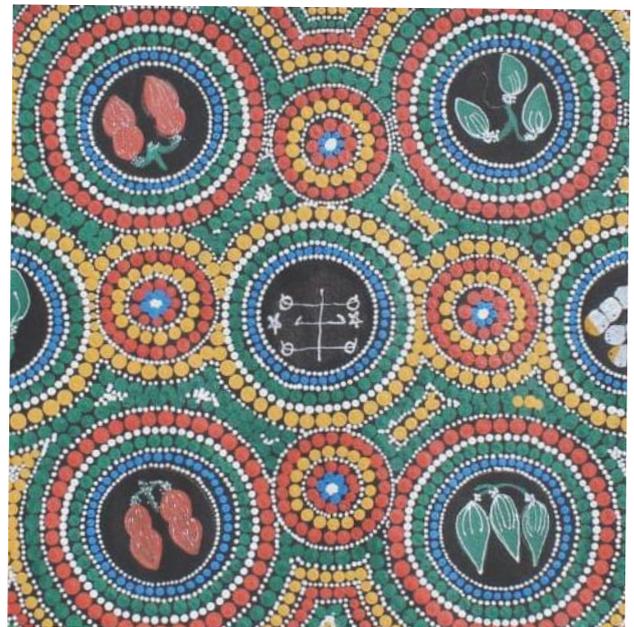
who brought to our shores a broad scope of experience and capacity, adding to the diversity of nations originally present.

A common thread running through our history are stories of good and bad times, moments worthy of both shame and pride. No nation has an unblemished record, yet those who have endured displacement and suffering, especially Indigenous peoples, have shown tremendous resilience. The power of the human spirit to transcend injustice and overcome crisis is a primary characteristic that has enriched and shaped the evolution of our society.

Our collective consciousness is slowly being raised to recognise and own our history, from those aspects of which we are most proud, including the heroes and heroines of all groups whose sacrifices, resilience and creativity have built contemporary Australia, to the injustices perpetrated, the mistakes made and the sufferings endured.

“So it’s about truth-telling. Let’s just get to the essence of who we are, how we got here, what occurred and not be fearful about that.”

— Participant, New South Wales



“I think I’d like us to be viewed as a multicultural country that is proud of its Indigenous heritage and that really celebrates it. That is still absolutely an aspirational sentence. I don’t think it reflects where we are at the moment. But I think it’s also an aspirational sentence that many would recognise. And that’s already something to celebrate. It’s taken a lot of work for us to hopefully have a consensus around that.”

— Participant, Victoria



Where are we now?

A TIME OF CHANGE AND TRANSITION

The embrace of our history has been hard-won and remains incomplete, but we are reaching a point beyond tolerance of diversity and moving towards celebrating, commemorating and appreciating one another's cultural contributions as belonging to everyone. In cities and regional areas, diversity is increasingly the lived reality of our educational institutions, our workplaces, our shopping malls, our neighbourhoods and our families. We want to see it reflected in our media, our boardrooms and other social institutions, extending into every limb of government at all levels.

“When we would have local Gadigal elders come to the Greek Australian events and we would speak to common experiences, that moment of connection was something that was incredibly powerful for me. And I think that is the success we forge in Australia when we do connect with each other.”

— Participant, New South Wales

We have come to accept diversity and now expect it. Moving beyond a superficial expression of inclusion, we now grapple with the question of what brings us together as a nation. Our multicultural country enables people to live side-by-side, but can also create cultural silos and exclusion through the language of “othering” seeded in prejudice and racism. We observe this counter movement towards insularity and tribalism, defining our identity and expected behaviours based upon the anxiety and uncertainty in a time of great transition and change. For young and old generations, straddling two or more cultural heritages is a struggle that undermines mental well-being, increases feelings of loneliness and challenges the desire to belong.

In recent years, technological and social changes have weakened the role of traditional print and broadcast media as a moderating force and communicator of shared values within our public discourse. Digital communications technologies, in particular the emergence of social media, has offered a platform for more voices to be heard, but also have allowed the most fractious and disagreeable voices to receive greater attention, while the creation of echo chambers has undermined genuine engagement between those of diverse views. The belief that the nation has become more fragmented has emerged partly because of the distortion of narratives on social

media and hyper-partisan political debates.

While our language and policy formulations have evolved from segregation through to assimilation, multiculturalism and the present-day focus on social cohesion, the question still remains: What can we do to safeguard and reach greater degrees of social cohesion and how will this shape our nation into the future? This is not a question for government alone; the answer must be found in the living and evolving conversations and interactions we have with one another.

“What in our identity helps us to unite with others and see things from their point of view, and what creates barriers? Today we see a tendency towards othering, looking for a target of hatred. How to transcend our sense of ‘I’ to include others as part of a broader sense of identity?”

— Participant, Australian Capital Territory

“We are seeing much more acceptance around difference, particularly among children and youth. We need to see the world through their eyes.”

— Participant, Tasmania



Fortunately, this project has shown that we are not as fragmented as many believe. One of the strengths of our country is a strong civil society in which individuals freely give their time and skills to assist and to work towards the well-being of the community as a whole. Australians have the capacity and resourcefulness to meet challenges by finding new and better ways of working together and sharing knowledge and insights. Though not uniquely Australian,

“It’s about seeing our own differences as complementary to each other, and we start being more accepting to the complementary nature of each other rather than conflicting. When we are in a socially cohesive society, our engagements are more about transformation - I transform their environment with them, our engagement with them, and, it transforms me when I engage with them. When we are not in a socially cohesive society our engagements are purely transactional... and there is no deeper level in which we engage with each other. So we want to be able to go from being transactional to transformational.”

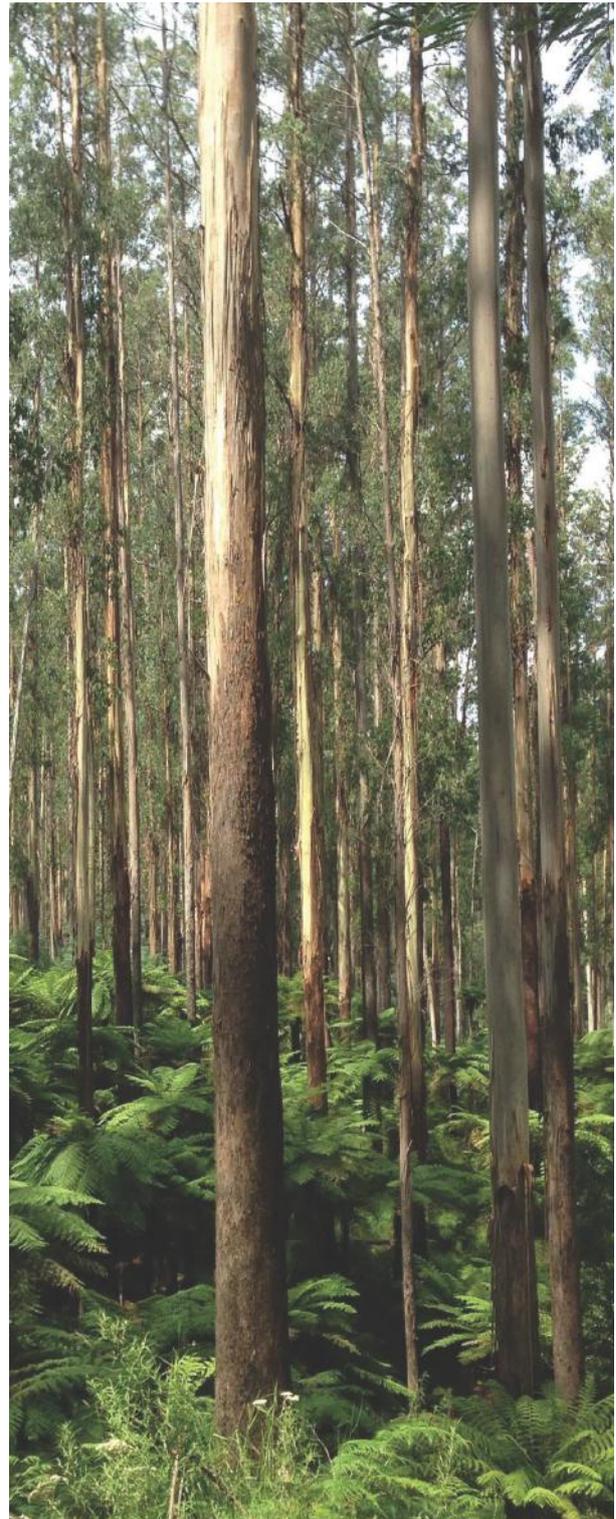
— Participant, Northern Territory

the courage and generosity of people coming together to address community-based problems is a reassuring theme in the Australian story. This spirit is especially apparent in times of crisis, when we help one another in the face of fires, floods, cyclones and pandemics. But it is also an underlying thread of everyday Australian life, running through sporting teams, school Parents and Citizens associations, hospital auxiliaries, religious charities, surf lifesaving clubs, and thousands of other settings. Working together in this way also breaks down fear and builds our sense of community, as we are able to share our stories and see the best of one another. It is when we are making a deeper contribution to strengthening the fabric of society that we feel we truly belong. How then are many voices and values of civil society groups, organizations and other bodies allowed to inform policies, practices and funding for the well-being of Australians?

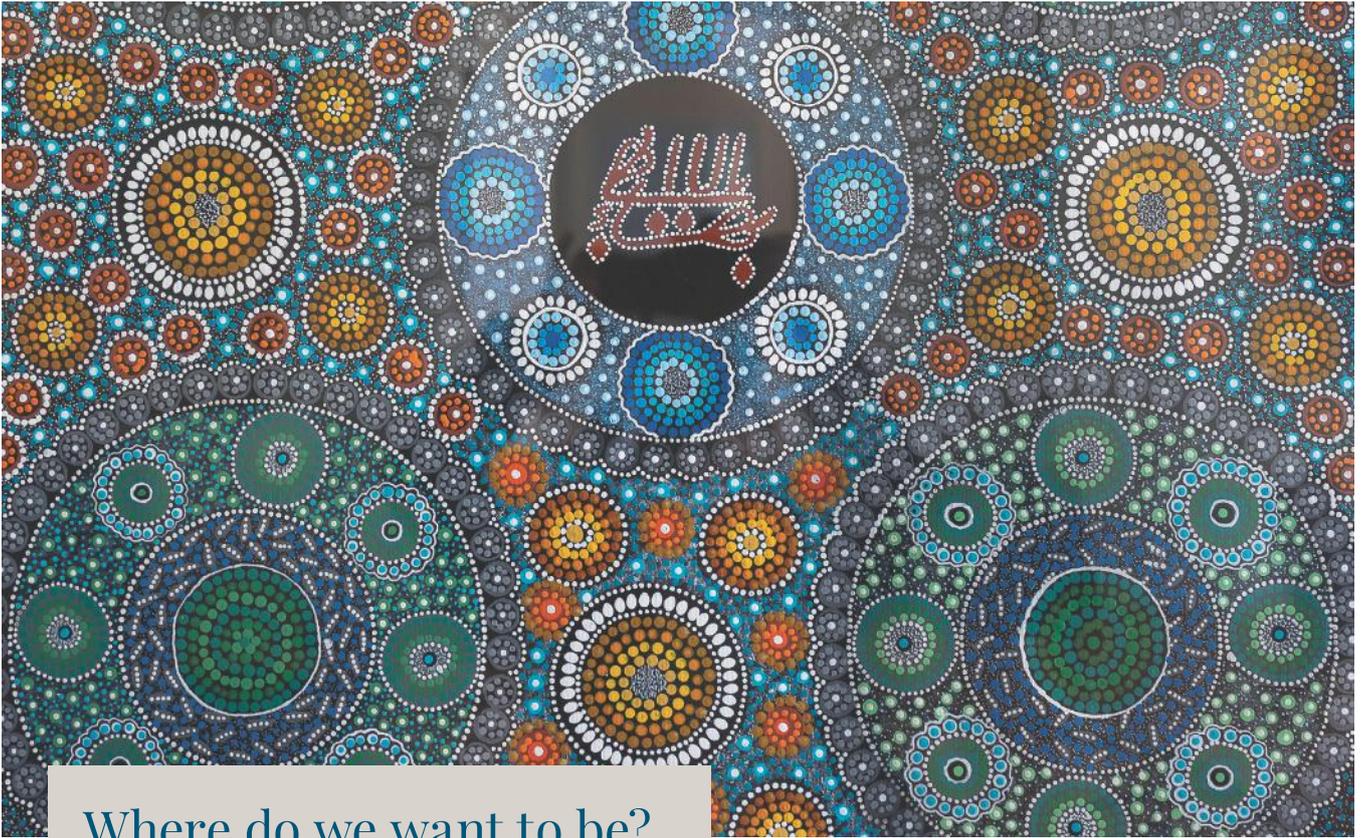
Times of crisis bring out the best in people, but they also highlight the inequalities and challenges faced by the most vulnerable and marginalised in our society. It is these minorities that best understand the issues at the grassroots. The challenge is how do those in power hear these voices? How can we empower the disempowered to feel that their contribution is important? How do we ensure that we hear not only those in the major cities, but also those who live in regional and remote parts of the country?

In reflecting on our current reality, it is helpful to look through the eyes of young people who are coming of age in our society. Many youth in Australia are asking themselves similar questions to those posed in the roundtables on which this paper is based: Who am I? Where do I belong? What does the future hold? Young people generally see our diversity as normal, and collaboration as natural. They have an inclusive approach and reach out to people without seeing difference as a barrier. Many are accustomed to drawing on more than one culture, language and tradition in their personal, family and spiritual lives. This openness to adaptation and flexibility — embracing beliefs, values and practices that help address the issues of today, and discarding outdated ideas — is a vital capacity for navigating our current reality and shaping our future.

Across society, passion and commitment to protecting and preserving the natural environment is becoming increasingly important and continues to gain a stronger collective voice. Concerns about climate change, drought, mining and reliance on fossil fuels, and protection of ancient Indigenous sites are common causes unifying Australians of different backgrounds, heritages and religions. For many young people, caring for and preserving the natural environment is an essential part of building a hopeful and secure future. To them, it is of primary concern and a first-order priority, as some



worry that the changing climate and deteriorating environmental conditions will fundamentally disrupt our social fabric and life as we know it — the effect of which will be felt in their lifetime.



Where do we want to be?

VISION, HOPES AND ASPIRATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING SOCIAL COHESION

A sign of a healthy multicultural and socially cohesive country is the recognition that we are one people, sharing a common homeland. This does not imply that everyone is the same, uniform or homogeneous, but rather that all people, in their diverse forms and functions, play a part in maintaining a socially and economically healthy society. The more diverse we are, the more conscious we become of our common humanity and that each person is essentially noble and deserving to be treated with dignity.

An overly individualistic view of one another can be an obstacle to

This painting is from the Arrernte community of the Northern Territory. It illustrates bush flowers of different lands and symbols representative the Arrernte and Baha'i communities, signifying the coming together of many lands.

strengthening our social cohesion and capacity to work in a collective and unified way. Seeing ourselves as relational beings assists us in overcoming social isolation and achieving well-being by building connections between all of us. Take the analogy of a family, in which the well-being of each member is a common concern for all. If one member of the family prospered at the expense and suffering of another, we would determine there is an imbalance. In a family, we engage with and value intergenerational voices, benefiting from the wisdom of older generations and the contributions of the younger ones.

A way to further appreciate our interconnectedness is to consider that we all share, benefit from, depend on and are a part of this planet. Our earth requires ongoing preservation and care to ensure the well-being of all life. A degree of love and respect for our environment – its deserts, islands, bush, waterways and beaches and the fauna, flora and marine life they sustain – is shared by most Australians. Similarly, the relationships we have with each other as individuals, communities, societal structures and branches of government are intimately connected and governed by the principle of reciprocity. This same love, respect and common interest towards our environment must be reflected in our social interactions, how our country is governed, and how resources are utilised for social cohesion to be cultivated. Our deep historical, cultural and spiritual connection to this land, combined with our connection to all human beings, form a complex ecological system, evolving and organic in its characteristics.

Australia's diversity will only continue to become richer and more complex. We will need to look beyond the "smorgasbord of cuisines" version of diversity and recognise that true value is derived from the people – their ideas and cultural frameworks, perspectives, talents, knowledge and insights. There is also a distinction between being 'valid' and being 'valued'. Validity is rooted in the right to exist while being valued is a

"We have become more individualistic as a society as opposed to collective, so people tend to have a greater self-interest than an interest for the community as a whole. So there is a question of how do we change that mindset so that we become more collective, rather than it's all about 'me'."

– Participant, Australian Capital Territory

higher ideal. What is sought is a society where ideas and experiences from those of varied backgrounds, upbringings, beliefs or socio-economic status are valued, respected and taken into consideration; where everyone is given the opportunity to fully and meaningfully participate in the life of society, including in decision-making processes, the way regulations and legislation are drafted and how policies and programs are implemented. Feeling unheard or overlooked continues to make certain minorities feel like they have no worth in society and results in insular communities unable to engage with or completely integrate into Australian society. This can lead to entrenched beliefs that some deserve to be in this country and some do not. The expression of this value lies in the participation of every people and culture in the progress of our country, beyond solely their economic contribution.

We cannot fully grasp the potential released by the impact of the aforementioned principles on our hearts and minds unless we make an effort to include everyone in the progress of our country. Inclusion is not a static final destination, but rather an active process that broadens involvement, participation and representation. Celebration and engagement are also part of this process, but inclusion calls us to go deeper, to yield insights for the way forward, to build a country where we are all flourishing through cooperation and a continuous process of giving and receiving.

Recent upheavals have forced individuals, community groups, institutions and governments to think of their relationships in a new way, working for a common cause or goal. This collaborative response to crisis can be extended into our collective everyday life to strengthen the fabric of our local neighbourhoods

“Society exists for the well-being of everyone. And that has implications on who is left out and who is not left out. That discussion is starting to occur, and I think it’s an incredibly positive one. It has implications across politics, across social institutions, everything. And I just really hope that Australia is able to have that discussion in a non-ideological way.”

– Participant, New South Wales



and society as a whole. As part of this conversation, opportunities to address gaps and build capacity will need to be identified and decided by all stakeholders, not with an attitude of blame, but rather with the perspective that social cohesion is an organic process, where each individual takes ownership and responsibility in playing their part.

Current circumstances have also opened the opportunity for us to carefully consider the sort of society we want to bring about and the new possibilities we can create that will allow for the well-being of all: a society where the circumstances or group into which a child is born do not prevent them from accessing the material, educational, cultural and other resources needed to fulfil their true potential and to participate in the building of a national community. The kinds of principles and values required for shaping our structures or creating a new conscience for our society is an important consideration.

Principles and values have a role to play because they help us understand where we want to go, but at times can be used to promote exclusion. The solutions offered by the most vulnerable, to address the challenges that they face, are often based on the awareness that we are interconnected. It is worth examining how we can reorient our structures and systems so our common humanity and the understanding that we are relational beings are drawn on as pivotal principles in guiding this process.

Creating spaces for dialogue is essential in forging our collective future and is of national importance. Drawn on as a method, rather than a product, dialogue offers a unique setting for the respectful



“...we are like one body, but with many members. Our body can function well because all parts work together. Your hand doesn't say I just want to do this and your head says no. So it's so important to respect and accept the weakness and strength from others, that is very important. So we can change the conceptions of 'us' and 'them' to 'us' and 'us'.”

— Participant, Northern Territory

exchange of thoughts and experience. Through the act of conversing with and listening to one another - especially those from diverse backgrounds and beliefs - we unlock our empathy, our sense of fairness and our compassion. Dialogue helps us identify common ground and, when done in a spirit of goodwill, deepens connections with each other. We are thus given the opportunity to collectively build our future and produce something of higher value. Through this process emerges a true understanding of how the sum of us as a society is greater than our individual parts.

“There need to be new indicators that consider greater variables rather than GDP or other economic measures. We have an opportunity to rebuild these systems and structures and rebuild humanity. We need to distribute our resources in an inclusive way, by having a holistic system that helps everyone and all individuals. Instead of thinking about people, we are thinking about profit, so we need to look, in the long-term, at the level of the community, socially and financially.”

— Participant, New South Wales



“It’s a very important discussion, especially for groups who are marginalised and not included – it’s not just a privileged discussion. Women, people of different sexualities, working classes still suffer social exclusion and this discussion is very relevant to them.”

– Participant, Australian Capital Territory

“It’s a conversation about the richness that people can bring to the table, no matter where they are from, or what they look like. It’s not about the economic side only, it’s about seeking value and we need to change our perspective to see diversity as value.”

–Participant, Victoria

“The challenges in society are too complex for one group to have the answer – maybe they have principles that can help but if everyone thinks together, they can feel as though they are a part of one country.”

– Participant, New South Wales

The richness and value derived from these exchanges, as evidenced throughout this project, have allowed us to identify what we agree on and consider important. We have had the opportunity to share in each other’s learning, and at the same time identify possibilities for the path ahead. This is an ongoing journey and one which requires universal participation, ensuring no one is left out of the process and its outcomes. How can we invite more people, communities and organisations to be part of ongoing spaces for dialogue? This process is an invitation for all Australians to engage in conversations that address social cohesion and the many other issues that may arise on our path ahead. This is a process that requires continuous work and one that we all share in and labour towards together.

It also requires regular reflection and refinement to ensure that everyone at all levels of society is treading a path towards a shared goal. Our understanding will naturally evolve as we continue to learn through action and reflection together. Australia has recognised the importance of social cohesion and has already started making in-roads to achieving it. A systematic approach will ensure that we work towards a common vision, reflect on our actions, identify what we have learnt, discover new opportunities for learning and to improve for future plans.



Pathways for action

The following pathways for action were taken from the roundtables and offered for sincere consideration. They are opportunities for everyone to learn how we can make significant yet achievable steps forward and build the collective capacity required to lay the foundations of a society that can address current and unforeseen challenges, demanding urgent attention during this time of uncertainty and change.

BUILD RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

It has become clear through the *Creating an Inclusive Narrative Project* that there is explicit value in establishing consultative forums focusing on social cohesion at the local level. Diverse individuals

“I think that diversity of thought and conversation is important. Being open to having conversations, regardless of whether or not we agree with what’s being said, because you never know, you might just be open to something new or have a thought that wasn’t in your mind before or listen to a perspective that you haven’t heard. But importantly, being a recipient of those thoughts and the way we receive those thoughts and then play them back is also important.”

— Participant, New South Wales



of all ages, backgrounds and groups should aim to come together regularly, drawing on their intergenerational, intercultural and interfaith wisdom. These consultations that have started at the state and national levels should continue and be extended to local levels – cities, towns and neighbourhoods.

Collaborative spaces can build in complexity, extending consultations to explore the broader well-being of a given locality and provide a critical opportunity for everyone to learn and collaborate on matters of common concern in a spirit of unity. Such settings help identify the needs of the community, the sharing of resources and strengthen networks. This leads to groups and communities being able to read their shared reality and helps cultivate ownership of the plans and decisions that impact human well-being. As an outcome, social cohesion advances and the capacity of a given community to respond to natural disaster or crisis is strengthened. In these spaces, everyone, including children

“We need social infrastructure in place before a pandemic, fire season or whatever because people are naturally good and able to help each other. They help people they already know, so communities need to be close and connected so the circle of connections can be expanded and people then help more.”

– Participant, Victoria



and youth, have the opportunity to collectively identify the conditions of the community and consider fundamental questions that have a bearing on the future, such as: How can we find a resonance across generations? How well can we read the signs of our times? What future will we craft for the children of today and for generations to come? What resources and capacities already exist in our community and what needs to be strengthened? How can we ensure that those who are unable to attend consultative spaces are equally connected? How can we work together creatively? How can we ensure respect, compassion, service and love are characteristics of everyday community life and not just when we respond to crisis? What are the habits of thought and action we need to foster the well-being and flourishing of every individual?

NEIGHBOURHOODS – SETTINGS FOR INTENSE LEARNING

Neighbourhoods are unique and special environments that deserve particular attention and support from all levels of society. In a neighbourhood, we have a shared identity and status: we are all 'neighbours' to someone. Here, intensive learning about social cohesion can take place and, most importantly, be sustained. This is where people can work constructively for social change, starting with small efforts which, through an ongoing process of action, reflection and planning, will grow in complexity and sophistication over time. Every neighbour is welcomed to contribute their time, resources, knowledge and skills, no matter how humble, and everyone can participate.

How can the constituent elements of a neighbourhood – individuals, groups, organisations, institutions and government – come together and equally share in reflecting whether we feel there is a sense of community and how do we maintain it? How can we come to know the ways each is fostering social cohesion? What are we doing as families and individuals? What social cohesion initiatives are already underway? Who is involved? What skills, resources and capabilities do we already have and what is missing? What policies and laws exist to maintain social cohesion and which do we determine are ineffective or discriminatory?

"I'm thinking about how these ideas are expressed at the local level. We have these wonderful theories, but it's mainly at the level of the neighbourhood where the opportunities for advancement exist and where we come face-to-face with the obstacles that we need to overcome as well."

– Participant, Northern Territory

"I think something that would be nice to see would be that everyone at the local level, at the grassroots, is given the opportunity to contribute to decision-making for the development of their locality... whether they are men, women, children or teenagers. Everyone's dignity is honoured and their thoughts are valued and this also informs the decisions made by the institutions in the country."

– Participant, Victoria





SOCIAL COHESION STARTS IN YOUR STREET

“When the pandemic lockdown first hit, I talked to my immediate neighbour and asked, ‘What can we do to help?’ We put a little note in everyone’s mailbox in our street and the ones next to ours, about 55 homes, saying we’d like to form a little group on WhatsApp called ‘The Stuart Street Crew’, everyone is welcome and to put their confirmation in my mailbox. Initially, I was hesitant, but my neighbour encouraged me. Out of the 55 homes, 36 said yes. So we set it up. The group is to help the elderly neighbours, ask questions, inform the neighbourhood, learn different skills such as gardening, making masks as well as learn new recipes. I said, in the beginning, it is not for ‘name and shame’. Everyone said a bit about who they are and over time the group grew to 52.

It has been quite successful. People would ask questions in the group like, ‘How do you motivate your kids during home-schooling?’ Someone wanted to know about growing lemons, some about baking. One lady taught us all how to make masks – we now have colourful masks made from old pyjamas, so she also taught us to recycle. It has brought so much joy. Everyone has been really respectful, kind and generous in words, thoughts and deeds.

This initiative gained so much traction that the city council asked if they could do a spiel on the group for their newsletter. And I said they would need 52 people’s approval because it’s not mine, we are a group and a family.

People would drop over produce from their own backyard and cook food for neighbours. But more than just the physical things, I know that they have my back and I know if I need stuff, I can approach anyone online. I think this is something really important in our lives, these little exchanges and just knowing people are there for you.

One neighbour posted they had noticed masks and gloves being littered around the nature strip. Others in the group said it’s quite dangerous. They contacted the Council, got someone to come and have a look. Normally Councils don’t come on board so quickly, but they jumped on it and asked us if we would like Primary Schools to make posters and we said ‘Yes!’ Now we have these really colourful posters made by the local Primary Schools students about why we should not be dropping masks. The idea is to put these concerns in the chat group – but not to point fingers at people – and to see how we can find a solution.”

– Participant, Victoria

ENSURE THE MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The full embrace of Indigenous peoples, through processes to recognise, reconcile and redress the multifaceted and multi-generational barriers to remove obstacles to their flourishing and participation still remains a significant impasse to our social cohesion. At all levels we need to acknowledge the voices and important contributions Indigenous peoples have made and continue to make in all aspects of progress in Australia, from community to government settings. Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being should be brought to bear on all decision-making processes, not only on issues facing Indigenous peoples directly, but also a broader range of macro and micro issues relating to the progress of the country.

Government, civil society and the broader Australian public are encouraged to make a concerted effort to understand, consult, and seriously consider the principles and values which lie at the heart of Indigenous culture and their current concerns. Deliberating deeply and striving to address these high-minded principles will release every Australian from the grip of the past and allow our highest aspirations for a flourishing country to be realised.

There is a growing consensus in our society that truth-telling and understanding the many stories in our Australian history is essential. Until this occurs, the ability for everyone in Australia to be united will remain obscured. Fostering a deeper appreciation of Indigenous history, culture and spirituality can create the conditions for it to be an integrated part of our everyday lives, and ensure that the languages and their stories are passed down to future generations. What are the views of Indigenous peoples on a broad range of prevalent concerns in Australian society? How do we avoid reducing their contributions to a few selected themes? What are the spiritual teachings and high-minded principles embedded in Indigenous culture? How do we learn together to apply them?

“The older I get, the more media I follow and read, the more I’m convinced that Australia’s relationship with its own Indigenous people is the key to how we deal with otherness. Where we progress and go backwards on that, affects pretty much everything we do.”

— Participant, New South Wales



RETHINK THE ROLE OF MEDIA

While acknowledging that most mass media organisations are driven by commercial imperatives, their role is nevertheless to be a constituent contributor to the conversation on social cohesion, particularly in highlighting the experiences that help advance the process of social cohesion. When news stories are guided and generated by the principles and values which animate the conversation on cohesion and inclusion, we see the possibilities for the media's constructive potential. Journalists aim to shed light on truth. The truthful telling of the multiplicity of stories which make up our kaleidoscopic nation – of five hundred Indigenous nations, European settlers, and waves of migrants and refugees – capturing human nobility in all its forms and going beyond celebrating difference, helps foster hope and becomes a binding force enriching the social fabric of our society. Can the media take on a greater share of responsibility in advancing and safeguarding social cohesion in the content they produce? How can news reporting overcome the tendency to overemphasise the fragmented elements of society or paint a segment of society in an overly critical light?

“Education is important too, because we have to think of the values we want to instil in our next generation, who are going to be making our country and the [diverse] people of our country all come together.”

– Participant, South Australia

REDEFINE THE PURPOSE FOR EDUCATION

It is not sufficient to have educational programs that promote only our diversity and its economic benefit. Understanding the nobility of all human beings needs to penetrate more deeply into our thoughts and convictions through our educational systems. Another very important dimension is to foster a culture of collaboration rather than competition. At the centre of educational programs, including community awareness campaigns and school curricula, ought to be what we have in common: our humanity. To have the concept of our common humanity as the centre around which all of our actions and intentions pivot would give greater meaning and purpose to our educational systems.

“Within a democracy like Australia, freedom of the press and media laws are critically important to make sure that we actually have truth in journalism, that we have accountability of government, and that we have messaging going to the public which is truly balanced, which is non-ideological and which is fair. And I don't think that Australia is there at the moment.”

– Participant, New South Wales

Most notable in our Australian context is to have educational programs that give a truthful account of Indigenous history with the intention of encouraging an appreciation of that history and fostering forgiveness, compassion and respect. Such programs are foundational to bringing about the necessary shifts in cultural and structural norms in Australian society which can then be expressed in social and legislative practice. Another advance would be for education in school, community, neighbourhood or tertiary settings to highlight how Indigenous cultural and spiritual practices contribute to social cohesion and broaden the reach of this knowledge to youth, adults, families and newly arrived adult migrants.

Some considerations for educational institutions and practitioners include: How can we collectively identify the milestones which indicate we are advancing towards systemic change? What capacities need to be built for cultural change to occur? How can we support youth to spearhead change and make a valuable contribution to society? What conditions need to be created so that all sides feel like partners in the process of social change, strengthening cohesion and inclusion for all?

DRAW ON THE TRUE PURPOSE OF RELIGION

When we visualise a socially cohesive Australia, it also includes religious groups. Sometimes religious groups are put to

“As an educator, in schools we try to create a culture of giving or a culture of caring, nurturing values of looking after each other. How do we go from raising awareness to behavioural change to collective well-being where these values are embedded? I think it’s educational, how we instil values early and young. For a lot of young people, it’s about having dialogue and safe spaces where people can talk and express what they are feeling and what matters to them. This is really valued and allows behavioural change to become embedded.”

— Participant, Australian Capital Territory

one side because they are depicted as a divisive force, but to deny their role would be a disservice to the process of strengthening social cohesion.

Religious groups, particularly religious leadership, have an opportunity to be actively involved in the discourse on social cohesion. Religion is, in essence, a force for love and unity, but it has unfortunately been used to divide, to pit people against one another and to promote and justify the ostracising of segments of society. Over recent decades, interfaith efforts in Australia have intensified and focused on fostering harmony between different religions. These efforts should be widened and extended. How can energies be directed deeper into religious culture and break



down the conditions that foster division between insiders and outsiders? How can every individual, including those who consider themselves a member of a religious community, strive to understand the true purpose of religion as being one of love and friendship, tolerance and compassion — a force which affirms and defends the honour and dignity of every fellow human being?

FOSTER NEW MODELS OF LEADERSHIP

Government plays a key role in leading and promoting the importance of social cohesion at local, state and national levels. Alongside the media and the arts, politics can shape how we view ourselves, our connections and our sense of purpose. Words and language have the power to affect and influence thoughts and actions in society. It is important to consider how language is used so that it is inclusive, acts as a unifying force and promotes our common humanity.

Historically, the government has played a critical role in assisting vulnerable and migrant populations in our country. However, the government's role is evolving and can be shaped towards the idea that we are all connected and not just disparate groups. The government must be a leader in promoting social cohesion and the recognition that, although we are made up of heterogeneous groups, we all share deeply profound connections. A two-way collaboration between a

government and its people becomes essential in this regard, given that individuals, communities and civil society want to be heard and want their concerns and profound ideas to be reflected in government decision-making. How can these protagonists work shoulder-to-shoulder with a unified vision? Considering that youth and young people carry with them the legacy of the past, how can their capacities be released to lead the way in building a firm foundation for a hopeful future?

The mantle of leadership does not lie solely with government: in our professions, our educational institutions, our neighbourhoods and our communities, many of us have an opportunity and a responsibility to provide leadership that fosters social cohesion. How can we make sure this is embedded in the way we live our lives and operate as a society? How do we want to help our most disadvantaged groups? During good times and difficult times, how can we constructively contribute to society?

“I was interviewing people from different backgrounds to see what is ‘faith’ in modern Australia. While people had a lot of reasons for what they believed, at the base it was all about being human, trying to believe in the best in ourselves, in others and in trying to do the right thing. That we can have diversity, inclusivity and connections, without stamping out difference.”

— Participant, Western Australia

“Leadership needs to incorporate all these values that foster inclusion and diversity in the way they do things and develop policy and plans... When they don’t do this, it dampens the spirit of the people of the country to participate in meaningful change.”

— Participant, Western Australia

“Education should be framed and the curriculum developed in a way where the aim is to help children see each other as one human family, to create unity and to live in a socially cohesive society.”

— Participant, Queensland



“Something I keep coming back to again and again, in conversations with many of my religious friends, is how so many religions have these core shared values which are taken on by secular societies. Those values such as “Love thy neighbour” do exist. These kinds of values all exist in some shape or form everywhere, to some extent. I think the other thing I come back to a lot is the collective nature of religion.”

— Participant, New South Wales



The Inclusive Narrative Journey

AN ORGANIC PROCESS

The *Creating an Inclusive Narrative Project* emerged from ongoing conversations with those engaged in the national discourse on social cohesion over a two year period; from a reading of Australian society developed through iterative stages of research, participation at events, conferences, seminars; and the experience of the Baha'i Community in community building endeavours. An initial series of explorative small group consultations bringing together a diversity of thought and experience culminated in a National Symposium on social cohesion.

The Symposium made clear the need for a narrative addressing fundamental questions of identity and belonging. Further consultations with government and civil society stakeholders confirmed such a narrative would help give critical insight into ways to advance social cohesion in Australia.

ENGAGING VOICES

Between July 2019 and September 2020, fifty roundtables were held throughout the country in all states and territories engaging participants from a wide array of backgrounds. This is considered part of an organic learning process and a springboard for a much broader conversation with all who live in the country. Building on the pattern of consultative settings used in the formative stages, individuals working with state or national bodies across a wide spectrum of our society participated in discussions facilitated by the Australian Baha’i Community. Contributions were offered through goodwill, evoked by a sincere desire to lend personal or organisational experience to a collective exploration of themes of vital concern to strengthening social cohesion.

Participants were individuals who took an interest in contributing their ideas to an inclusive narrative. A wide spectrum of experience and backgrounds were brought into the discussion from various sections of society, including Indigenous community leaders and organisations,

ethnic and religious community members, interfaith groups, community development sectors, migrant and settlement services, disability advocacy groups, federal, state and local government departments, primary, secondary and tertiary education, gender equality groups, mental health and healthcare, law, human rights, business, environment and landcare, youth work, research and academia, social sciences, authors, journalists, media practitioners and artists.

Particular focus was given to strengthen participation from journalists and media practitioners, youth, and the Indigenous community. Although the participation of segments of society was consciously tracked and adjustments were made to ensure an equitable engagement,





naturally not every voice that makes up the full spectrum of Australian society could be included. These limitations were due in part to the vast size of the country and the project time-frame that naturally limited the number of roundtables and contributions that could be offered and captured. Additionally, roundtables were hosted in a centralised location, either online or in a physical locality, requiring participants to 'come to' the roundtable. Ideally, where resources and time permit, additional phases of these roundtables would engage many more groups, backgrounds, and leanings by taking the initiative beyond organisational structures and representation to individuals in grassroots communities.

As this project sought to be a gift to the nation, costs associated with hosting the roundtables were covered by the Baha'i Community.

PROMOTION

The roundtables were promoted through the network of the Australian Baha'i Community and in collaboration with other organisations who encouraged representatives from their own networks to attend. Details for each roundtable were disseminated drawing on personal invitations, online event platforms, social media, organisational mail outs and newsletters. The roundtables were also promoted at events on social cohesion, including the *National Social Cohesion and Inclusion conference* hosted by the

Australian Baha'i Community (November 2019) and the *Advancing Community Cohesion Conference* held at the Western Sydney University (February 2020).

FORMAT

Roundtables were rolled out in every state and territory across the country over the course of a year. Prior to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face roundtables were held in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Brisbane. These were hosted at universities, multicultural hubs, corporate settings and during workshop sessions at two national social cohesion conferences.





Roundtables were designed to run for 90 minutes, with time dedicated to reading the concept note and a discussion on the nature of Baha'i consultation. Generally, a maximum of twelve participants were engaged in each session to allow for a deeper engagement with the concepts and give time to make contributions and respond to each other. Consultations were guided by one or two facilitators with a notetaker to capture key insights. All of the roundtables were recorded (with the consent of participants) for analysis, then synthesized as part of the distillation process for the development of the narrative document.

The emergence of the COVID-19 global health crisis in March 2020 required roundtables to be moved online as they

continued to be rolled out across all states and territories. One implication was that it allowed the conversation to expand and include those in regional and non-urban settings. This meant that the roundtables were able to help overcome some aspects of the rural-urban divide, a strong force at play when it comes to the cohesion of our country. Overall, participation increased as access to the roundtables was no longer hampered by the need to travel to a physical location. It is acknowledged that in moving the roundtables online, this also required participants to have access to stable internet, appropriate digital infrastructure and personal space to participate, which may have created barriers for some in joining this conversation.

FACILITATION

The conversations facilitated during the roundtables were framed by the principles of Baha'i consultation. Participants were invited to build on each other's ideas, identify challenges and offer constructive contributions and explore diversity of thought and opinion while engaging with a posture of respect for one another and for those who were not present. Facilitators were mindful of eliciting equitable contributions from all participants so that no one individual experience or opinion dominated the overall trajectory of the conversation and every participant was afforded the opportunity to contribute to the discussions. These guiding principles were drawn on to shape the environment and tone of the conversation in recognition that a unifying process of eliciting contributions and content could itself contribute to the social cohesion of our country.

A concept note with a set of thematic questions formed the basis of each roundtable. Having a common document to frame and guide the discussions ensured that each session shared a common starting point. The concept note offered an articulation of society and helped unpack some of the assumptions that underpin the overarching discourse. Its questions opened an explorative dialogue to examine themes including belonging, identity, and the values on

which we wish society to draw on going forward. This helped elicit insights, ideas and descriptions of our common identity and shared values.



ADVISORY BOARD

Experienced individuals recognised for their commitment to advancing social cohesion in our country were invited to serve on the project's Advisory Board. They were asked to analyse the distilled content from the roundtables and offer recommendations on the themes, insights, experiences and pathways for action to be captured in the final narrative document. The Advisory Board also provided recommendations on how the document could be structured in a way that would be most helpful for implementation.

OUTCOMES AND OUTPUTS

Content from the roundtables were captured in audio recordings, some of which have been released online through the *Creating an Inclusive Narrative Project* webpage as a series of podcasts capturing insights from states and territories, youth and an 'in conversation' series with those connected to the media or journalism. The podcasts and other content, such as photographs and suggestions, are featured on the webpage, showcasing the diversity of participation while also allowing for project transparency. This offered the opportunity to benefit from the content explored during the roundtable discussions as well as follow the development of the project.

Key insights offered during these roundtables led to the formation of ideas and themes that are captured in the *Creating an Inclusive Narrative* section of this document. Engagement in these roundtables became a unifying process in itself, as participants were able to harmonise a diversity of thoughts and experiences, in turn building a greater appreciation for one another's experiences and aspirations. What emerged was an acknowledgement of the possibilities, concepts and themes for greater cohesion and inclusivity for all Australians, and an appreciation of consultative spaces, as one critical and practical approach to strengthening social cohesion in our country.





A Commitment to Strengthening Social Cohesion

The following two concept papers, 'Consultation' and 'Diversity and Oneness' offer the insights, ideas and experiences of the Australian Baha'i Community for consideration as part of our sincere commitment to learning shoulder-to-shoulder with our fellow Australians to strengthen social cohesion.



Australian Baha'is are engaged in various efforts alongside other groups and organisations to contribute to the social, spiritual and material development of individuals, neighbourhoods, communities and social institutions.

Thought and language around different social issues profoundly affect individual and collective action. Public opinion, policies, social structures and systems grow out of the thinking generated around these issues.

Therefore, the Australian Baha'i Community strives to contribute to public discourses on various issues of significance to Australian society, drawing on our practical experience and collaborating with, and learning alongside, civil society, religious communities, those in the media, academia, government and other like-minded individuals to collectively advance thought in these areas.



Consultation

The *Creating an Inclusive Narrative Project* roundtables adopted the consensus-based approach to dialogue utilised by the Baha'i community in collective decision-making. This paper outlines the distinctive elements of the Baha'i approach to consultation, which is offered as a tool for bringing individuals, groups and organisations together to explore reality and make collective decisions.

This project has demonstrated that there is a unique power in the simple act of bringing people of different viewpoints and backgrounds together to explore a common set of questions and discuss their lived experiences. When conducted in an atmosphere of respect and in good faith, with trust and an openness to learning from others, divergent perspectives can yield unexpected

insights, seemingly irreconcilable views can be transcended, and common ground can be more readily found. There is a deep thirst in our society for social spaces where civil dialogue can take place, from the grassroots to the national level.

The atmosphere and manner in which consultation is carried out is critical. Adversarial methods of debate, partisanship or protest are not conducive to building consensus; nor will spaces where participants feel their involvement is superficial or tokenistic generate a collective will to act. What is required is a different approach to decision-making and dialogue, one which acknowledges and unlocks the capacity of every individual and group to contribute to constructive social change.

True consultation requires an atmosphere characterised by courtesy, candour and trust, where all are equal participants in a collective search for truth, which is rooted in the recognition of our common humanity. Ideas belong not to the individual who articulates them during the discussion, but to the group as a whole. Once a view has been contributed, the group can use it, set it aside or revise it in their sincere search for truth and determine the best course of action in a given context. Individuals are invited to build on the ideas that have been contributed by others, to be open to learning and to transcend their original points of view rather than insisting upon them. Once a decision has been reached, all participants are to lend their full support to its implementation, so that it can be genuinely tested on its merits and not doomed to failure from the outset because of a lack of support.

If the results are found wanting, further consultation can occur in light of the experience gained and lessons learned.

Consultation will achieve the best possible outcome when it draws upon all viewpoints. The challenges we face as a society are complex, and no one group, ideology or culture has all the answers. The more we draw on our diversity, the more complete will be the picture of social reality available to all participants, and the greater the new perspectives and methods of thought gained. At the same time, the very act of bringing people together enables prejudices to be dispelled, bonds to be forged and new partnerships made possible. Accordingly, the participation of those who might otherwise be excluded – including women, youth, immigrants and Indigenous peoples, among others – must be not only valued but actively





sought out and embraced. Everyone must have a seat at the table.

Exclusion from consultation is a way of suppressing participation in the development of society. In subtle or overt ways, throughout our history and through to the present, we have seen countless examples of exclusion. This very act conveys the message: “You have nothing of value to offer.” To overcome this, it is important to identify, address and remove any barriers – whether based on customs, habits, prejudices or social structures – to ensure that those who have traditionally been at the margins of society are included and accorded a central role in the conversation. Such participation must not be tokenistic, and the participation of marginalised groups should not be limited to the options predetermined by those more dominant.

Consultation can be utilised at all levels of society, from a family setting to the national stage. Government can and must play an important role in providing or lending support to spaces where consultation can occur between diverse actors. At the same time, our experience suggests that some of the most powerful consultative spaces can emerge from grassroots settings. After all, social change should not be a project that one group of people carries out on behalf of another. Where individuals and groups take the initiative to come together to address challenges, identify

the opportunities before them and become protagonists in developing and implementing solutions, ownership of the space rests with the participants themselves. All feel they have a voice, and all are empowered to make decisions that affect their own lives and the society around them.

The Australian Baha’i community draws on a century of experience in using consultation as a means for consensus-based decision-making in families, communities and institutions from local to national levels. In offering consultation to our society as a tool worthy of consideration, we do not pretend to be masters at wielding it ourselves, whether in the *Creating an Inclusive Narrative Project* or elsewhere. Structures and habits of domination, oppression and self-interest take generations to overcome, and we do not underestimate the scale of the task at hand. We all have much to learn and look forward to walking this path of learning alongside our fellow Australians.



Diversity and Oneness

Australia has achieved a great deal in recent decades in building a largely peaceful and harmonious multicultural society. Still, much work remains for the country to live up to its ideals, fully reckon with the injustices of its past and present, and ensure that everyone feels they truly belong in our national community. Strengthening social inclusion will therefore demand more than simply carrying forward current thinking and practices.

Our experience in creating dialogues with a wide range of stakeholders on the subject of social cohesion has made clear that, while essential, recognising our diversity is not enough. In addition to

acknowledging what we are and where we have come from, it is vital that our discourse on social cohesion look to the kind of society we wish to build together into the future.

At the core of the Baha'i community's perspective on building social cohesion are the complementary concepts of the oneness of humanity and unity in diversity. Humanity's oneness is the pivot around which the Baha'i Faith revolves, and it is our belief that any sound vision of national identity must fall within this overarching framework. Far from hindering difference or undermining patriotism, accepting that our primary identity consists in belonging to a single



human family enhances our national and cultural identities by placing them in their proper perspective. It dissociates our distinctive identities from the destructive implications they can bring about when taken to extremes – such as racism, defining oneself in opposition to “others” and other forms of overt and subtle discrimination.

Similarly, unity in diversity – when used as more than an empty slogan – presents a fundamental challenge to the way most of us see ourselves and others. In contrast to assimilation, which asks for homogeneity, and certain ideologies that can lead to the essentialisation of difference, the ideal of unity in diversity protects distinctive expressions of culture while calling for the enthusiastic embrace of others. It moves beyond mere tolerance and counts cultural diversity as an asset. By drawing on a wider array of talents and capacities, it entails the weaving together of many different cultural strands into a wholly new pattern of community life – a pattern which is more beautiful by the variety of its elements.

Just as the richest ecosystems are those marked by their biodiversity, so too societies have the potential to be made stronger by their cultural diversity. Of course, actualising this potential depends on establishing frameworks and norms to ensure the cohesion of all of society’s members; it thus represents a challenge

that more homogenous societies may not face. It is when this work is left undone that cultural diversity comes to be viewed as an obstacle to societal well-being. But when relationships of reciprocity and interdependence are fostered at all levels, as they are in ecosystems teeming with life, the result is a social body more resilient to change and able to give expression to the wider range of creative capacities it possesses.

Another analogy from the natural world – the human body – further illustrates this point. Consisting of countless individual cells of diverse characteristics, the human body relies on the associations of its component parts at multiple levels for its healthy functioning. And crucially, it is the perfect integration into the body of all of its cells and organs that permits the full realisation of the distinctive capacities inherent in each element. No cell or organ lives apart from the body, and each derives its well-being from the well-being of the whole.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that oneness and diversity should not be seen as competing considerations. Working for oneness does not represent an appeal for uniformity, and diversity need not be viewed as an obstacle to reaching agreement. For example, while diversity is often understood in terms of different cultural backgrounds, where all have different but valid insights to offer, it can also be understood in terms of

one's relationship to historical injustices. In this case, the perspectives of those who have experienced injustice becomes indispensable in efforts to construct a more just society. Drawing on the widest possible participation in decision-making processes on issues of shared concern — and particularly on those voices that have historically been marginalised — can help ensure that blind spots are minimised or removed altogether. The challenges our society faces are large and complex, and listening to diverse voices in decision-making can help make the final decisions more robust and durable.

Our experience of Australian life is that various communities and groups do not exist as static, isolated entities. Instead, our values and ideals are constantly evolving through dialogue with individuals and groups from different backgrounds. At the individual and interpersonal level, this dialogue often takes place informally in our day-to-day lives in schools, neighbourhoods, workplaces and sport fields. It also takes place within our increasingly intercultural families. The ability to engage in constructive intercultural dialogue depends greatly on the sorts of ideas that we communicate — or fail to communicate — to our children and youth, as well as to older members of our families.

Intercultural exchange can go beyond the appreciation of diverse cultural expressions, such as food and events,

to breaking down artificial barriers between groups through sincere bonds of friendship. In many ways, it may be at the local community level that we must discover answers to certain basic questions about social cohesion in our country.

Of course, it is key that this understanding not remain localised but increasingly be translated into change at the societal level. For it to be sustainable, the effort of building a socially cohesive country will require approaches that go from the bottom up and from the top down. As such, it is essential to also foster intercultural discourse in larger, more formal settings — in conferences, seminars and meetings, amongst institutions and groups from city councils to the federal Parliament.

While it may not be necessary to arrive at a single definition of what it means to be Australian in the 21st century, engaging in such a multi-level process of social discourse can help us to negotiate and transcend our differences to create a new shared culture of diversity and oneness. Australia's diversity could well prove to be one of our greatest assets if we can learn to unlock its full potential.

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SO POWERFUL IS THE LIGHT OF UNITY
THAT IT CAN ILLUMINATE
THE WHOLE EARTH

BAHA'I WRITINGS

O E A . B A H A I . O R G . A U

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